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The Guest in My Sitting Room

Television viewing in later life

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Yesterday, I phoned my Internet and cable provider. That corporate conversation was—to say the least—a frustrating and demoralizing experience. Am I the only person who believes that cable companies are bent on “ripping people off?” Is there an alternative? Or I should ask if there an alternative for someone who is not technologically skilled enough to come home and fiddle with multiple remotes in order to access the evening news? These days if you have no Internet or cable, you are likely to be disconnected from society and the world. It leaves you feeling isolated and lonely.

Internet and TV access provides news, social connectivity, information, and entertainment. For many older adults on fixed incomes, however, it is difficult to pay 200 dollars a month for such services. There are alternatives through which one can lower costs—Apple TV for example. These alternatives do

require a degree of technological savvy'. At the end of a long day, many people prefer to sit down and turn on the news or watch old film without the difficulties of learning how to master multiple service providers. As a result many of us continue to pay excessive Cable/Internet bills. We sign up for so called "specials" which limit our cost to a some overpriced amount we can live with for two years. At the end of that time, we end up in a frustrating demoralizing conversation like the one I had last week, a conversation where you attempt to gage what you can and cannot comfortably afford and live with or without and what you can manage financially.

Some of my technologically savvy friends have abandoned the notion of watching TV altogether. Instead of subscribing to cable providers, they rely only on Netflix and Amazon Prime. How things have changed! During my [childhood](#) when I lived outside of the United States, we eagerly anticipated the prospect of watching three hours of television in the evening, programs which mostly features exotic life in America. With the family gathered around the set, we watched old American television programs like reruns of Gunsmoke and Leave it to Beaver. Those TV programs provided me an early image of my future home. They made me want to move to a land with comfortable homes, open spaces, and amazing mountains. Now many years later when I come home from work and turn on the television I remember those early impressions of longing for a life in the United States. Those feelings make me appreciate being here especially during busy and [stressful](#) times.

However watching television used to be simple and straightforward, these days my viewing pleasure is reduced by the high cost of access. I know many people, especially elders, in my community who cannot afford the monthly costs of Internet and cable services. Sadly if they have to cancel their cable services as a result, these older adults also risk losing their connection to the outside world. My mother recently moved in with my sister so she could better pay her bills and have more discretionary income. Among her concerns was the very high cable bill that had exceeded her monthly fixed income budget. Should having access to entertainment and news really be a source of stress for people, socially older adults on a fixed income?

Connectivity, of course, is not without its problems. No psychologist would advocate that anyone, of any age, spend their waking hours in front of a television—this is not a balanced or healthy way of living. In fact studies indicate that as Americans we spend far too much time watching TV. On average, Americans spend 4.5 hours a day watching TV. As for older adults,

they tend to watch more TV than do younger and middle-aged individuals. In a survey of how Americans use their time, TV viewing accounted for 25%–30% of waking hours and represented half of the leisure activity among those over the age of 65. Spending that much time in a passive sedentary activity can have significant negative health consequences. Even though research indicates that older adults may watch more TV than their younger counterparts, they also tend to enjoy it [less](#). In The New York Daily News, David Hinckley reported in the March 5, 2014 edition, that those over the age of 65 watch TV more than 50 hours per week. This is an astonishing and troubling number. The number of hours people watch TV also varies by ethnic group, with African Americans watching the most TV, and Asian Americans watch the least. This high level of TV viewing is, of course, not healthy, it reduces physical and cognitive functioning.

It is important to explore both the positive and negative consequences of TV viewing in later life. Clearly seniors watch more TV than any other age group. Gerontological research has begun to explore how all this sedentary time spent in front of the TV impacts the health and well-being of older adults. Beyond the negative effects of a sedentary life, TV can also be a source of comfort, companionship, and social integration, having access to the companionship of a television can help reduce [loneliness](#) and isolation. For those over 86 who live at home TV viewing is reported to be a central activity. According to a qualitative study by Britt Ostlund, older adults watch TV as a way of coping with disengagement, which means that TV viewing helps older adults to stay culturally connected to the societies in which they live. According to this Scandinavian study, TV viewing among older adults in a residential facility makes a significant contribution to their capacity to cope with later life disengagement and can serve as a way of promoting communication and in fact increasing well-being.

In short television viewing in later life can serve to connect with the larger world. Viewing also shapes reality and reinforces one's views. According to the social psychological theory of [cognitive dissonance](#) proposed by Festinger people tend to view programs that reinforce their ideas and beliefs. Such viewing can hinder cognitive challenges and lead to a lack of growth and potential passivity and decline among older men and women.

In times of stress television viewing can provide comfort, entertainment, and emotional connection. Unfortunately it can also be a mechanism of dependence increasing sedentary behavior and decreasing physical well-being. In a study exploring the long-range mental health impact of television

viewing and physical activity habits of more than 3,200 men and women, the authors found that those who watched more than 3 hours of television a day and had a low level of physical activity were more likely to score low on mental performance [tasks](#).

Clearly, television viewing at any age has positive and negative consequences. Too much time in front of the too is not a healthy way to spend ones days, but an hour or two of mindful viewing can have relaxation and social and psychological connectivity benefits, but connectivity should not have to cost so dearly.